An Analysis of Political Polarization and Trust in the United States

Undergraduate Research Thesis

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for graduation "with Honors Research Distinction in Sociology" in the undergraduate colleges of The Ohio State University

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November 2019

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In 2016, the campaign and subsequent election of the 45th US President Donald Trump led to a series of outcries and sociopolitical backlash that was felt for months. The lead-up to and aftermath of Trump's presidency seemed to incite more than mere political outrage (Filipovic 2016). There has been an increasing emphasis placed onto the relationship between political opinions and interpersonal integrity. Phrases like "Trump supporter" became a pejorative in leftist and liberal circles, and the President's campaign slogan ("Make America Great Again") became symbolic of white nationalism and racial hatred (Crockett Jr 2019). As such, recent political discourse (post-2016) has been characteristized as divisive and polarizing.

In this context, I ask: When did politics become so deeply intertwined with our social relationships? A 2018 study, for example, shows that close-tie familial relationships have been burdened by increases in political partisanship among the electorate (Chen and Rohla 2018). I am interested in if, and how, the political climate can affect peoples' social behavior at the individual level. In particular, I will be examining the relationship between political polarization and social or generalized trust.

Social trust relies on a certain understanding of community, and its strength can be indicated by how much we trust one another and how we think people taking advantage of one another affects our society. "[Trusting individuals] tend to believe in a common culture, that America is held together by shared values....they are also supportive of the legal order" (Pickett and Wilkinson 2009). It would thus appear that the level of trust we have for one another, and how we perceive others (as generally altruistic or generally selfish), plays a distinct role in individual-level political opinion formation. If we view others in a distrusting manner--that other people are selfish, self-interested, and taking advantage of the system--then we are less likely to

feel obligated to help out our community. Instead, we may feel more inclined to align with conservative ideals that emphasize individualism and hard work (without welfare or hand-outs). Wilkinson's (1996) concept of individualism suggests the "practical separation of each person's interest and identity from those of others". While conservatism has historically conferred a general distrust of the government, these feelings of distrust have been shifted onto *other people*. In other words--it is not that the government cannot be trusted with handling welfare, but rather that welfare recipients themselves cannot be trusted.

Though we can see how changes in trust may affect personal political decision-making (more will be said on this later on), conversely, how does political polarization and increasing partisanship affect the way that we trust one another? Previous studies on trust and inequality have used income inequality as an independent measure. That is, that "inequality...affects trust, not the other way around" (Uslaner 2002, as cited in Pickett and Wilkinson 2009). I argue that political polarization has a similar effect on trust.

As political polarization increases at the institutional level, I hypothesize that general social trust will decrease at the respondent level. The marked increase in political polarization throughout the past four decades has accompanied other widespread policy changes and systemic phenomena, such as increases in income and wealth disparities and negative impacts on health outcomes. Increasing income stratification has been shown to have adverse effects on both physical and mental health, as well as social cohesion[1]. The predicted relationship between political polarization and social trust would, presumably, imply the presence of other intervening

[1] R. G. Wilkinson examines the relationships between health, mortality rates, homicide rates, social cohesion, and income inequality. When income inequality is high, "more people are denied access to sources of status, respect, and prestige and so are more likely to feel sensitive and vulnerable to being disrespected" (Wilkinson 1999, pp. 530).

factors that relate the two variables, just as Wilkinson (1999) suggested how health indicators may play a role in elucidating the relationship between income inequality and social cohesion.

It is also important to address the relationship between health and socioemotional behavior. “Health in relation to friendship, social support, and social involvement shows that mortality rates can be two to four times as high among those who are poorly socially integrated compared with those with more friends, more social support, or more community involvement” (Wilkinson 1999). Wilkinson (1999) also suggests a relationship between relative deprivation (a form of inequality found in especially in the poor in market economies) and a poorer social environment and violence. Furthermore, he claims that the market institutionalizes individualism—and it ends up affecting other aspects of social life; human interaction then becomes “dominated by the asocial values of the market” (Wilkinson 1996). Because the market produces inequality, it would then follow that social values and interactions, such as positive social trust and social cohesion, are formed due to the structural processes responsible for exacerbating inequality. Wilkinson asserts that humans are not physiologically conditioned to endure the amount of stress that incurs from occupying a lower social status and from “the lack mutually supportive social relations” (1996), which are products of pervasive inequality. Here, Wilkinson provides the theoretical foundations which link individual attitudes to the structure of income inequality. I take the relationship one step further, and argue that income inequality acts as an indicator of conditions within broader processes, such as public policy and political decision-making, which may in turn affect levels of inequality (amongst other things).

Obstructions or impediments to the political decision-making process can lead to ensuing adverse social, economic, and cultural consequences, one of them being a decline in social trust.

Previous research on political party-sorting suggests that partisan polarization reflects alienating "us vs. them" attitudes amongst politically active individuals[2]. "As parties become more homogeneous, political issues become more partisan and divisive", which propagates political gridlock and erodes attempts at bipartisanship (Fiorina 2016). Thus, policy--which may in fact help improve factors such as crime rates, health outcomes, wealth disparities, poverty, hunger, etc.--is stagnated; which in turn may lead to declines in social trust and social cohesion. Given the above, I predict that political polarization will be negatively related to social trust.

Methods

The phenomenon of "social trust", or how much individuals may trust one another in general, is difficult to quantify. To find an appropriate quantitative measure of social trust, pre-existing data was taken from the General Social Survey (GSS) from years 1978-2018. The GSS is a widely-used national survey that "gathers data on contemporary American society in order to monitor and explain trends and constants in attitudes, behaviors, and attributes" ("About the GSS" 2016).

I adopted methods based on Kawachi et al.'s 1997 study *Social Capital, Income Inequality and Mortality,* which focused on assessing how income inequality is related to social cohesion and mortality rates. The data used to measure social capital was drawn from the General Social Survey to measure levels of civic engagement and social trust. The two primary aspects of social capital were stated to be civic engagement and social trust.

> "Social trust was assessed from responses to two General Social Survey items that asked: 'Do you think most people would try to take advantage of you if they got a chance, or

[2] "...The more partisan or ideological the respondents, the more they exaggerate the differences between themselves and their political adversaries (from Westfall et. al 2015)....[Researchers found] systematic exaggeration of polarization: the positions actually held by Republicans, for example, are not as extreme as Democrats think they are, and vice versa. Consistent with various psychological theories, the tendency to push the other side further away is stronger than the tendency to exaggerate the extremity of one's own side" (Fiorina 2016, pp. 32)

> would they try to be fair?' (perceived lack of fairness) and 'Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted or that you can't be too careful in dealing with people?' (social mistrust). In addition to the social trust items, we evaluated the response to another General Social Survey item as a marker of social capital: "Would you say that most of the time people try to be helpful, or are they mostly looking out for themselves?" (perceived helpfulness)" (Kawachi et al. 1997).

From a study referenced in Pickett and Wilkinson's *The Spirit Level* (2009), social trust within the US was analyzed using the same item from the GSS, "can most people be trusted or that you can't be too careful?" to compare and analyze the effects of income inequality on social trust. However, the "trust" variable alone did not satisfy the entire dimension of what I aim to capture; which is generalized social trust among individuals, and their obligations to and perceptions of others.

Dependent Variable

Using factor analysis to pinpoint a selection of variables believed to be associated with feelings of trust and socioemotional well-being, three variables were summed to generate a scale denoting social trust. The three variables were coded by the GSS as "trust", "helpful", and "fair". *Table A* shows the label, associated survey question asked, and the answer options available to respondents. Collectively, these variables were denoted under one label, "social trust."

Variable label	Survey question	Answer options
trust	Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted or that you can't be too careful in dealing with people?	1. Can trust, 2. Cannot trust, 3. Depends
helpful	Would you say that most of the time people try to be helpful, or that they are mostly just looking out for themselves?	1. Helpful, 2. Lookout for self, 3. Depends
fair	Do you think most people would try to take advantage of you if they got a chance, or would they try to be fair?	1. Take advantage, 2. Fair, 3. Depends

Table A: GSS Survey questions

These variables were selected based on keyword searches through the GSS database. Keywords such as “trust”, “help”, “fair”, “social”, “satisfy”, “confident”, and variables were chosen based on relevance of survey questionnaire and range of years in which the variable questionnaire was administered. Of the several dozen variables selected and analyzed, factor analysis (see *Table B)* was used to identify the three that were strongly correlated with one another, and driven by a single underlying factor that I term “social trust”.

Each of these survey questions indicate a different aspect that, once combined, indicates a more general interpretation of social trust. Each survey response denotes the respondent’s sentiment towards others, and how they *view* other people. As such, these survey questions focus on the perception that the respondent has of others. The questions of “fairness” and “helpfulness” were included, alongside the question of “trustworthiness”, to examine other and more indirect

dimensions of social trust. These three values were also used to indicate social trust and social capital by Kawachi et. al (1997).

	Factor Loading	Uniqueness
trust	0.561	0.684
helpful	0.577	0.666
fair	0.618	0.618

Table B: Factor analysis for the three variables from the GSS, "trust", "helpful", "fair", which are driven by underlying condition "social trust". Factor loading > 0.50 considered acceptable. Eigenvalue= 1.031

Independent Variable

To measure polarization, I used data compiled by *Voteview,* which hosts a compilation of data measuring congressional ideology on a libeal-conservative scale using DW-Nominate data procedures (Dynamic Weighted NOMINAI Three-step Estimation). Developed by political researchers Poole and Rosenthal, the DW-Nominate procedure is a "scaling procedure", and indicates the level of ideological closeness, on liberal and conservative dimensions, between legislators (Poole et. al. 2019). I measured political polarization by deriving average scores from the *party-mean-difference*, which indicate the difference in ideological scores between Republicans and Democrats. The average was taken of this score from House and Senate (from the two Chambers of Congress), by each year from 1971-2018 (Figures C and D).

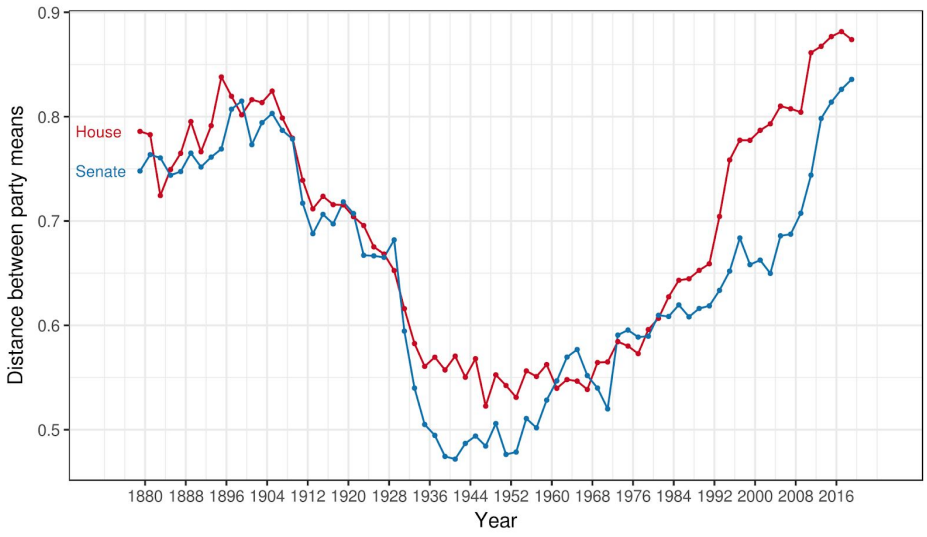

Figure C: Liberal-conservative partisan polarization by chamber (Lewis 2019).

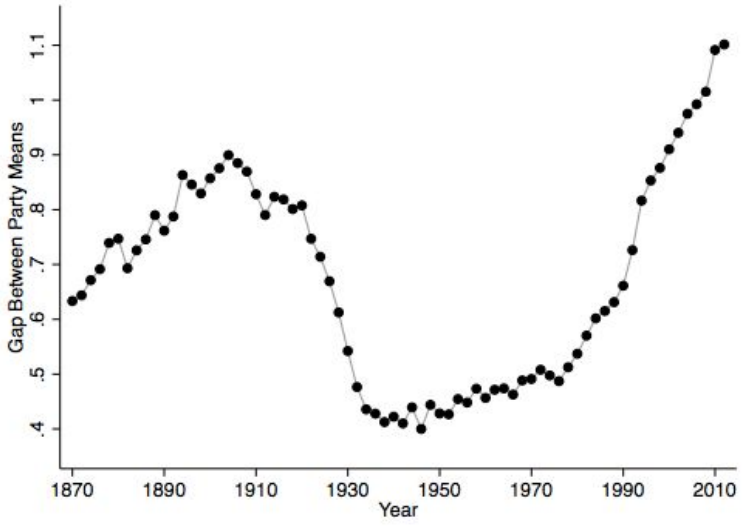

Figure D: DW-NOMINATE scores showing party-mean polarization. "Each point indicates the differences between the parties' mean DW-NOMINATE scores, with higher values along the vertical axis indicating greater party polarization. DW-NOMINATE scores for individual legislators range from -1 to 1" (Moskowitz et al. 2019).

To ensure that the effect of polarization on trust was not driven by some other variable that is correlated with both social trust and polarization, my analyses controlled for the following

factors: individual political ideology, race, sex, geographical region, income, unemployment, and year from 1978-2018.

	Mean	***Std. Dev.***
social trust	6.007	2.221
polarization	.709	.078

Table C: Descriptive statistics for variables "social trust" and "polarization", for years 1978-2018 (Based on Model 2)

Results

The goal was to determine if there was a relationship between political polarization and general social trust in the US. *Table 2* displays the scaled relationship (using z-scores) of the two variables *social trust* (zTrustScale) and *polarization* (zPolarization) through 2018. While polarization increases over this period, trust is on the decline, as anticipated. To ensure this pattern is not explained by some other factor, I used multivariate regression to control for other factors. The results (*Table 1*) revealed a statistically significant negative relationship between general political polarization and social trust. That is, as polarization increased, social trust decreased. *Model 1* shows results from 1978-2016. *Model 2* also includes 2018 (i.e., the Trump era).

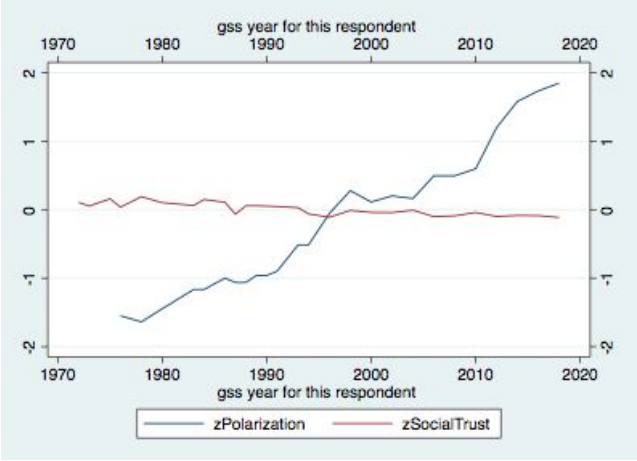

Table 2: Standardized scores showing the negative relationship between social trust and polarization (year 2018 included)

These results confirm the hypothesis that polarization results in decreased social trust. There is a negative relationship between polarization and social trust. As political polarization increases by a factor of 1 unit, social trust decreases by 1.817. When considering the effects of race and gender on social trust, on aggregate, from years 1978-2016, black respondents have lesser degrees of social trust (-1.110) than other races (-.751). Respondents' income (.107) .sex identity (.134) and political ideology (.048) did not appear to have significant impacts on degree of trust.

Table 1: Summary of regression results from predicting social trust

	MODEL 1 (2016) *Coef.* *(Std. Err.)*	***MODEL 2 (2018)*** *Coef.* *(Std. Err.)*
Polarization	-1.817*** (.3155)	-2.282*** (.320)
Race (black)	-1.110*** (.040)	-1.140*** (.037)
Race (other)	-.751*** (.057)	-.762*** (.053)
Sex (Female)	.134*** (.025)	.134*** (.024)
Political views (liberal/conservative)	.049*** (.009)	.048*** (.008)
Income	.107*** (.005)	.108*** (.004)

*Note: ***p<.001.*
MODEL 1 n=27,565; MODEL 2 n=30,438 (includes year 2018)
Excluded geographical region, unemployment, and year.

To supplement my initial findings, I next examined a more political and economic dimension of "trust" that was additionally documented by the GSS from 1978-2018. The variables in question look into respondents' confidence (or trust) in American institutions; primarily those governed by economic and political policy. The survey question asked, "As far as the people running these institutions are concerned, would you say you have a great deal of confidence, only some confidence, or hardly any confidence at all in them?"; the specific institutions selected included the legislative branch of the federal government, US Supreme Court, Executive Branch of the federal government, press, education, major companies, and banks and financial institutions (see Table E).

Confidence in:	Factor Loading	Uniqueness
Legislature	0.637	0.583
Supreme Court	0.555	0.687
Executive Branch	0.581	0.646
Press	0.377	0.844
Education	0.446	0.796
Major Companies	0.448	0.770
Banks & Financial Institutions	0.489	0.734

Table E: Factor analysis for the seven "confidence" variables from the GSS, which are driven by underlying condition "confidence in institutions". Factor loading > 0.50 considered acceptable. Eigenvalue= 1.834.

Table 3: Summary of regression results from predicting confidence in institutions.

	MODEL 3 (2016) Coef. Std. Err.	***MODEL 4 (2018)*** Coef. Std. Err.
Polarization	-7.326*** (.404)	-5.739*** (.412)
Social trust	.199*** (.007)	.196*** (.007)
Race (black)	.177*** (.052)	.161*** (.050)
Race (other)	.893*** (.074)	.867*** (.071)
Income	-.048*** (.006)	-.047*** (.006)

*Note: ***p<.001.*

MODEL 3 n=25,342; MODEL 4 n= 26,538 (includes year 2018)

Excluded geographical region, unemployment, and year; sex and political views p>.05.

	Mean	***Std. Dev.***
confidence inst.	13.849	2.764
polarization	.709	.078

Table E: Descriptive statistics for variables "confidence in institutions" and "polarization", for years 1978-2018 (Based on Model 4)

In this analysis, the relationship between the two variables is much more intuitive; as such, these findings act as supplementary to the initial hypothesis rather than stand-alone results. The same measure of political polarization was used to analyze the relationship between polarization and confidence in institutions. These findings, along with the initial measures of general social trust, support the argument that political polarization leads to decreased trust in political and economic institutions. *Table 3* shows the negative relationship between polarization and confidence in institutions in 2018 (-7.326) and in 2016 (-5.739). From year 2016 (see *Model 3*), respondents' income (-.048) and race (.177 for blacks, .893 for others) did not appear to have significant impacts on confidence in institutions. Sex and political ideology (liberal vs. conservative) were excluded from both models ($p>.05$). The analysis controlled for the same factors: political ideology, race, sex, geographical region, income, unemployment, and year from 1978-2016, with social trust and year 2018 included. According to Welch et al. (2005), a significant area of research in political science aims to uncover "the extent to which institutional trust is influenced by interpersonal trust." Interestingly, social trust did not appear to have a significant impact on confidence in institutions (.199 for 2016, .196 for 2018), when compared with other factors.

Limitations

The GSS, while comprehensive in the vast collection of data which it provides over nearly four decades, is nonetheless limited in the breadth of survey questions that it may consistently ask over an extended time period. The three items used to determine *general social trust* are thus limited as well. "Trust" is a relational item; its variance is an indication of respondents' feelings and attitudes in relation to how they perceive others. As such, it is an inherently subjective measure.

Another potential limitation lies in the type of variable itself. As Uslaner (2002) suggested, "the kind of trust that is being measured in surveys [such as the GSS] is trust of strangers, of...people who are often not like us" (Pickett and Wilkinson 2005). There are other dimensions of general social trust, such as those that examine variability in close-tie relationships, that are not captured in the three-item *social trust* variable.

On the measure of polarization, I specifically examine "elite polarization", occurring between members of Congress rather than amongst the public (Fiorina and Abrams 2008). One explanation for the increase in elite polarization over time suggests that "republicans' movement toward the ideological extremes thereby accounts for a disproportionate share of increased polarization." (Moskowitz et al. 2019) Even considering this, the results showing the negative correlation between social trust and polarization still stand. This finding could give insight into further analysis and study of this relationship, however. In other words, that perhaps another dimension of the bivariate relationship involves increasing conservatism in the US and in congress.

It is important to note that these measures of marked elite polarization may not accurately reflect the publics' social or political attitudes, in spite of the fact that Congress members must, after all, be chosen by voters. Baker (2005) suggests that "almost all social attitudes—even about emotionally charged issues such as homosexuality—are not polarized….most social attitudes are….becoming even more similar over time" (cited in Fiorina and Abrams 2008).

Discussion

Wilkinson (1996) suggests that differences in social cohesion are indicative of structural issues rather than due to variances at the individual level. For example, when income inequality is high, "more people are denied access to sources of status, respect, and prestige and so are more likely to feel sensitive and vulnerable to being disrespected" (Wilkinson 1999). I argue that there is a similar relationship between elite polarization and social trust. The results show that social trust and polarization are inversely correlated. These findings could help to explain psycho-social changes in perceptions of and relationships with others at the individual level. I interpreted the relationship by drawing two possible conclusions from the findings.

First, that public policy decisions can contribute to, exacerbate, *or* alleviate structural inequalities. Structural inequality, such as racial, income, and wealth inequality, leads to poorer social cohesion and leads to lower levels of trust between individuals. This may occur due to a variety of factors, including differential physical and mental health outcomes, crime rates, and conditions of poverty, which are outcomes of worsening structural inequalities. When the public

policy decision-making process is polarized, structural inequalities worsen, which leads to decreased social trust.

The second explanation is that polarization at the institutional level "trickles down" into public perception through media and popular culture. Increased elite polarization creates the illusion that the electorate is also deeply polarized, and non-elite individuals align themselves with the increasingly partisan political groups. As these political groups (liberal and conservative) grow more distant from each other, "each party gradually comes to have less contact with, knowledge of, and sympathy for the constituencies of the other" (Fiorina 2016). The increasing schism between parties arouses feelings of distrust and disdain among the populace, which is recognized as a decline in social trust.

Individual-level political attitudes may remain similar across decades, however, evidence suggests that elite polarization (or polarization at an institutional level) has increased significantly. Variations in social trust may be influenced by systemic consequences of institutional elite polarization, which would not necessarily reflect or be reflected in polarization of the electorate. While there is a clear correlation between elite polarization and our measure of social trust, the effects of individual-level party ideology (on liberal-conservative lines) do not have a significant impact on degree of trust (see *Table 1).* According to earlier studies of the GSS and NES data by DiMaggio (1996) and Evans (2003), there are no findings that "support for the proposition that the United States has experienced dramatic polarization in public opinion on social issues since the 1970s" (retrieved from Fiorina and Abrams 2008). According to Fiorina and Abrams (2008),

> "The political positions of Americans had not become more polarized between the early 1970s and early 2000s. Importantly, however, within the larger population the parties in the electorate had become more distinct."

In his 2016 book, "Unstable Majorities", Fiorina continues this claim that "the way that Americans self-categorize their ideological positions has changed little in four decades". The findings from *Table 1* confirm this claim as well, revealing that the GSS measure of political ideology (.049) did not have as significant of an impact on trust compared to the effects of increased elite polarization. The jump from -1.817 in Model 1 (the data up to 2016), to -2.282 in Model 2 (including data from 2018) is significant. This suggests that, in the two-year span following Trump's election to office, there is a significant decline in aggregate social trust, a change of -0.465. This finding provides backing for the aforementioned sentiment regarding interpersonal strain upon the election of President Trump.

However, when looking at the supplementary analysis of confidence in institutions amidst increasing political polarization, there is a marked increase in confidence from -7.326 in 2016 (Model 3) to -5.739 in 2018 (Model 4). This finding suggests that, in spite of declining rates of trust and increased polarization from 2016 to 2018, that confidence in institutions has slightly increased--although there is still a notable negative correlation between confidence in institutions and polarization at the institutional level. This negative relationship implies that increased polarization within political and economic institutions results in individuals' decreased confidence (or "trust") in said institutions.

Though the extent to which social trust begets trust in institutions (and vice versa) is inconclusive from these findings, there is evidence that both factors are negatively correlated with increases in elite polarization. From a sociological perspective, preserving social trust is

important so that "that vibrant communities will inevitably generate enough social capital to meet the needs of individuals and the common good" (Welch et al. 2005). From an economic perspective, preserving social trust is essential to "enhance economic exchange" (Putnam 2000, Krishna 2000; Welch et al. 2005), and maintaining high levels of confidence in social, political, economic, and financial institutions is arguably necessary for the effective functioning of these institutions. Thus, from both an economic *and* sociological perspective, there arises an incentive to attempt to preserve and restore social trust and confidence in institutions, and to decrease political polarization.

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